

Jasmine Moon

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CHAPTER

1

You will either marry Robert Tabor or return to the convent in New Orleans."

Eulalie's face turned pale and she moved a step nearer the man who had spoken, her hands in a subconscious beseeching.

"There must be some mistake," she said in a quivering voice. "Papa Ravenal would never force me to marry someone I don't even know."

For a moment the man's stern face softened. "I am sorry, but the terms of your stepfather's will are clear."

Then the man assumed his former harshness as he continued in an admonishing tone. "You forget that Robert Tabor was his heir long before he met your mother. Since you are actually no blood relation of his, you should be pleased that he wanted to provide for his stepdaughter, as well."

"And he has not provided for me, if I refuse to marry this man?"

"No, Miss Boisfeullet," the solicitor answered. "If you dare to oppose his last wish, then there is no place for you except the convent. You cannot remain here alone."

The deep brown eyes of the girl hinted of tears, but she brushed her hand across her

face, as if to deny the unwanted display of emotion.

The solicitor waited impatiently while Eulalie stared out the window of the salon. In the silence she struggled with the sudden decision thrust upon her.

Outside, the September sun was merciless, projecting its fiery rays upon the recently drenched land. Heat steamed from the saturated earth in visible hot vapors to permeate the seldom-used drawing room of the beautiful old Carolina plantation house.

Unmindful of the stately vista of magnolias before her, Eulalie fleetingly brushed her finger across the stained strip of wood separating the leaded panes of glass. She was conscious only of the heat and the problem that had so suddenly spoiled her day.

Finally, she turned and spoke. "And how does Monsieur Tabor feel about marrying someone he has never seen?"

"Robert Tabor is prepared to go through with the wedding. He has already signed the documents for the proxy marriage."

"Proxy marriage?" Eulalie repeated. "Do you mean....?"

"He wishes the marriage to take place as soon as possible. But he plans to stay in Paris for a while longer."

At the surprised look in her eyes, the solicitor hastened to assure her. "Even though there will be a stand-in for him, the marriage

ceremony will be legal. All you need do, Miss Boisfeulet, is to sign the document also, and then the ceremony will be arranged, making you mistress of Midgard Plantation."

She could say nothing. Eulalie felt numb, unable to protest. He had said she had a choice, but it was not true. Who would willingly choose to be shut away from the world forever?

Her silence was taken for acquiescence, and the short, stout man led her to the writing table and handed her the quill with which to sign the official-looking parchment.

She watched as if another hand were forming the letters of her name—Eulalie Boisfeulet. When the last letter was written, the solicitor smiled and said, "I believe you have chosen the wiser course, my dear. And now that you have agreed, we can set into action the instructions Robert has given."

The solicitor, impatient to get back to Charleston before the mosquitoes began their late afternoon bombardment, picked up the parchment and hurried from the room. It was unhealthy for the young girl to remain on the low-country plantation during the malaria season, but Robert had given no instructions for her to be moved into town. He shrugged as he climbed into his phaeton. The business of the proxy marriage would be best disposed of as soon as possible.

Long after the man had gone, Eulalie remained in the salon. She sat, unmoving, in the blue velvet chair and stared at the low,

needlepoint-cushioned footstool that stood to the right of the hearth—the gift she had worked on so industriously the year before for Papa Ravenal.

How proud she had been when she had finally embroidered her initials and the date on the red-and-blue circular design—E.B. 1808. It had taken many hours, but she had finished it in time for Christmas. And Papa Ravenal had been so pleased with it. But now he would never use it again to ease his gout.

Back and forth she traced the neat stitches with her eyes, until darkness crept into the room and the design became blurred in the shadows—shadows that leaped onto the walls and magnified the massive furniture of the salon.

"Maman, what shall I do?" her frightened voice finally whispered through the room, but the dark silence mocked her words. There was no one to hear, no one to give answer. And it was already too late. She had placed her name on the marriage document beside that of Robert Tabor.

At the head of the stairs she stood, while Feena adjusted the train of her ivory satin Empire wedding gown. Luckily, the heirloom veil of Alençon lace hid the stubborn jut of her chin and the angry flash emanating from her dark brown eyes.

Eulalie's mind whirled in remembered agitation

at the words spoken to her on that fatal September afternoon. And she was no more reconciled now to marrying Robert Tabor than she had been on that first day.

Robert Tabor. She recoiled at his name. A smuggler—a pirate. That's what Papa Ravenal had called him because he had flaunted the Exchange Act, taking the rice and cotton to trade in the forbidden foreign markets. Yet, all the time, Papa was planning for her to marry him. That's what he had meant when he told her that he had changed his will to provide for her. Eulalie was even grateful at the time for his generosity, but now...

"They're waiting for you, mam'selle," Feena whispered.

Eulalie looked down at the foot of the stairs, where the solicitor stood in his formal afternoon coat and tight-fitting breeches.

The servant's words prompted Eulalie reluctantly into motion. She started down the steps, and when she had reached the final tread, the man held out his plump hand to claim her.

"My dear, you are lovely. A pity that your bridegroom cannot see you as you are now."

"*Merci, monsieur,*" she murmured, suddenly ashamed of her animosity. After all, it was not the solicitor's fault that the wedding was taking place, nor that Robert Tabor had not felt the marriage to be of sufficient importance to

return in time for it.

On down the hall they walked, until they reached the doors of the salon. Two men, standing near the fireplace banked with magnolia leaves and yellow jasmine, looked up as the girl approached.

The parish priest in his ecclesiastical robe remained where he was, but the tall, dark-haired stranger took his place beside Eulalie. And the ceremony began.

Not looking at the stranger, Eulalie said her vows in a whisper. The deep voice of the man answered her, usurping the words that Robert Tabor should have been saying. Only when the heavy gold ring was slipped onto her finger did Eulalie look up to catch the fleeting, wistful expression in the man's eyes.

"...by the powers invested in me, I now declare that Robert Tabor and Eulalie Boisfeulet are husband and wife. Whom God hath joined together..."

* * *

Many miles away from the Carolina plantation, Robert removed the white, graceful arms encircling his neck and climbed out of bed.

"Why do you have to hurry, *mon cher*?" the woman protested. "Eet is still early."

The man deftly avoided the tapered hands that reached toward him to draw him back into bed. Shaking his head at the red-haired beauty, he said, "You should not be so greedy, my love. Have I not spent the entire afternoon with you?"

Robert glanced quickly at the clock as he began to dress. Six-thirty. Hector would have been waiting for him for some time. Robert was not happy, remembering his reason for meeting his cousin—to celebrate his proxy marriage. Calculating the exact time at Midgard, Robert realized that he was already a married man.

"Would you like to be the first to congratulate me, Babette? he queried, the dryness in his voice unmistakable. "I was married a half-hour ago."

At his announcement, she shuttered the long, dark lashes of her sloe eyes and in an uncertain voice asked, "These marriage—eet will change things between us, *non*?"

A wicked grin lit up the handsome man's face, while his tawny eyes traveled insolently over the white, smooth skin that was only partially hidden by the blue silk sheets.

"Not until I decide to return home," he replied.

"And when will that be, Robert?" she purred like a contented cat, opening her eyes wide and stretching.

"When Paris no longer amuses me," he answered, leaning over to kiss her lightly on the lips.

She laughed and put her arms around him, drawing him back to her, but once again, he escaped her embrace.

Resigned to his departure, she sighed and lay back on the pillows to drink in the magnificent

view of the man before he was encased in shirt, breeches and coat. His golden hair surrounded his well-shaped brow like a crown, and as she watched the muscular, strong, demanding body, she trembled in remembered ecstasy.

"Tomorrow?" she asked in a questioning tone, when he had finished dressing.

He nodded and, closing the door behind him, disappeared.

For a moment, she listened to the vanishing steps, and then she sat up, holding her wrist one way and then the other. Watching the emerald bracelet, its dark green fires glittering under the lights, she smiled.

Robert left the house and stepped out onto the pavement, where a carriage waited. The two black horses pawed nervously and snorted, while the driver struggled to keep them under control.

As Robert climbed into the carriage, the white-haired man seated inside said, "You're late."

The young man jovially countered, "Love is not always guided by the clock, Hector." Then his face lost its pleasantness. "Only marriage," he added. "And I suppose by now I have already been saddled with Uncle Ravenal's scrawny stepdaughter."

Hector frowned at his words and made ready to reply, but the sudden lurch of the carriage stopped the conversation. The horses' hooves struck upon the cobblestones as the carriage

swung around the corner of the Rue de la Victoire. Then, righting itself, the vehicle slowed to a reasonable pace and soon came to a stop before the dimly lit café.

"Ah, Monsieur – what a pleasant surprise."

The owner of the café, wiping his hands on the apron that concealed part of his tremendous bulk, greeted the two well-dressed men and led them through the noisy crowd until they came to a table away from the steadily rising hum of excited voices.

With the tail of his apron, the owner deftly wiped off the two wooden chairs and then hovered to take their orders.

"Why is everyone so excited, Adolphe?" Robert asked.

The man looked over his shoulder and in a lowered voice replied, "Have you not heard, monsieur, that the Emperor Napoleon is divorcing his Josephine, because she cannot produce an heir?"

"So, it is true – the rumor I heard yesterday," Robert mused.

"*Oui*, monsieur." And then Adolphe leaned closer to impart another bit of information. "They say he has already selected another wife. the young Archduchess Marie Louise of Austria."

Hector, suddenly interested, asked, "Isn't she the niece of Marie Antoinette?"

"Grandniece," the owner corrected. "And the marriage is to take place by proxy in Vienna,

the same way her *grand' tante*, Marie Antoinette, married the Dauphin."

Robert frowned and became silent while Hector, sensing Robert's withdrawal, questioned Adolphe concerning the menu.

When the food and wine had been selected and the man had left, Hector said, "You seem to be in royal company, Robert—to be married by proxy."

"But unlike Napoleon, Hector, *I* did not choose my bride," Robert said, with a bitter twist to his mouth.

Hector quickly changed the subject, and soon the food appeared—the thick, succulent sausages, Camembert cheese and fresh bread. When the first bottle of wine was gone, Robert ordered more.

There was an awkwardness between them. And so, steeped in their own silence, Hector watched and listened to the uproar about them, while Robert, having lost all interest in the animated crowd, appeared oblivious to everything except the empty wine glass in his giant hands.

Gazing at the glass, his tawny eyes suddenly took on a fierce and flashing glow, and his square jaw assumed a belligerent position that indicated his annoyance.

"By God, she shall pay for this!" Robert blurted out.

Surprised at the sudden outburst, Hector looked at his handsome, spoiled cousin, who at

that moment resembled some young Jupiter ready to hurl a thunderbolt at the cause of his displeasure.

"I suppose you mean your wife, Robert." the older man said above the conversation at the other end of the café. "But that is no attitude to have. It was your uncle's decision. The poor girl probably had even less to say about this marriage than you. And remember, you had a choice."

"A choice?" he snorted. "With my pockets empty and my ship and cargo confiscated by the British? No, Hector, there was no choice but to marry this...this stepdaughter of his, if I ever wanted to see my inheritance."

"Yes, so you decided," Hector reminded him in a dry tone. "And it is far too late to back out now."

"But God, how it rankles. Me—Robert Lyle Tabor—being forced into marriage with someone I've never even seen."

Still scowling, Robert looked up to gain the attention of the café owner, and when he had done so, he motioned for another bottle of wine.

"Don't you think you've had enough for one night, Robert?" Hector asked.

Robert ignored the question and when the new bottle of wine appeared, he lifted his glass full of the golden, bubbling liquid.

Suddenly, Robert's frown disappeared. His eyes narrowed and then a smile spread across

his face—a smile far more deadly than any frown that had ever knitted his brow.

Holding the glass high, Robert said, "Well, little Eulalie Boisfeulet Tabor, when I have finished with you, I think you will regret the day that you persuaded Uncle Ravenal to change his will."

And with one gulp, Robert downed the liquid.

Hector was alarmed at the coldness in Robert's voice. He hoped the young bride had some measure of beauty—enough to take Robert's mind off his anger, and also of his *chère amie*, whom he would be forced to leave behind when he quit Paris to go home to Carolina.

"Are you ready now, Robert?" Hector asked, anxious to separate Robert from the bottle of wine he was consuming.

"No. Go ahead," he urged. "I'm going to stay awhile."

Long after Hector had left the café, Robert sat and brooded over events of the last voyage—the events that had made it necessary to accept the terms of his uncle's will.

Examining each detail, each minute action, Robert was back again, hiding in the darkness of the mouth of St. Mary's River. He could feel the endless blackness enveloping him, could smell the saltwater marshland in his nostrils, while the boat rocked gently from side to side, waiting...

"They're late," he said to his companion. "I wonder what's keeping them this time?"

The swarthy, muscular seaman beside him was slow in answering. Finally he spoke in an economy of sound.

"Maybe they had to hole up on Ossabaw or Sapelo Isle for a while because of the storm. Maybe they're scairt of thunder and lightnin'. But they'll be here soon, Robert, when the storm's over. Matthew ain't let you down yet."

The man spit his tobacco juice into the deep black waters of the deserted cove.

"Well, he'd better get here before the sun comes up," Robert replied. "Otherwise, they might as well turn around and go home."

"You expectin' this to be a dangerous trip, Robert?"

"No more so than usual, Muley," he muttered while the softly lapping waters cradled the boat.

Robert listened while he continued watching from the mouth of the river for some sign of life. He slapped at a mosquito buzzing about his head but missed. The humidity clung to him, and no breeze stirred on the June night to ease the suffocating heat that straddled the coastal boundary between Georgia and Spanish Florida.

"Heard the British tars stopped another ship last week," Muley commented. "Took off five seamen, claimin' they was deserters from his Majesty's ships. One was old Lonnie Spinks,

whose ma spawned him on Sullivan's Island. All they had to do was listen to 'im talk. Anyone with half a brain could tell he wasn't no limey."

"That's just it," Robert growled. "They don't care. You would think we were still their colonies and that the War for Independence had never been fought."

"The British ain't the only ones actin' high and mighty. Them Frenchies is pretty bad, too."

The noise of the katydids scraping their wings together in an eerie Jew's-harp twang came to an abrupt halt. A lone bullfrog croaked his contentment and was silent, leaving the senses with the sweet-sour smell of the swamp drifting through the air.

Then a new sound replaced the night voices. It was a whisper of movement upon the waters coupled with a creaking of poles methodically working their way through the shallow parts of the marshes.

Robert laid his hand on the seaman's arm. They both lifted their heads in the direction of the sound. Instantly alert, they waited and watched while the sound gradually grew louder.

Casually, Robert whistled the first line of the slave song peculiar to his uncle's plantation. "Tremblin' woman and a tremblin' man..." He listened for the next line. The answer floated over the water, sweet and pure. "God gwine

hol' you wid a tremblin' han'." And Robert relaxed.

The log rafts came into sight, carrying their cargo—bulky bales of cotton and wooden barrels of rice, smuggled through the string of golden isles dotting the coast. In the shadow of Amelia Island, the bastion of pirates and privateers, Robert's ship lay safely anchored, waiting for this last portion of cargo.

"One raft lost to de wedduh, Robert," Matthew stated apologetically. "E dere, near Sapelo. Waves lick 'em up."

"Anybody drowned, Matthew?" Robert questioned.

The Gullah shook his head. "No suh. Ah done tell Claudius fuh de two-time 'e lucky, knowed how to swim."

"And my uncle? How is he?" Robert asked.

"Low wid de fever," Matthew replied. "She-she talk say Miss Eulalie's nursin' 'e real good. But 'e be bad sick. When yoonah come home, Mr. Robert?" Matthew asked.

Robert gritted his teeth and replied with an edge to his voice. "Uncle Ravenal made it clear he doesn't wish to see me until I have given up my *lawless ways*."

There was no more conversation. Robert was pressed for time.

With the cargo taken aboard ship, the men turned their rafts northward and disappeared.

Shortly before dawn, the *Carolana*, flying a Portuguese flag, set sail from Amelia Island

and headed toward the open sea.

Robert stood on the quarterdeck, his eyes searching the sparkling blue waters for some sign of a British frigate. The element of danger in running the British blockade heightened his pleasure—that and the knowledge of the tremendous profits that would be his when he delivered his cargo to Napoleon's door.

They had been out for three days when the shout of "Sail ho!" came from the lookout. Robert, in the captain's cabin, grabbed his breeches, slid them on and stormed toward the deck. Muley stood at the rail, peering through the telescope at the approaching vessels.

"How many do you make out, Mr. Mulineer?" Robert asked his first mate.

"Three, as well as I can tell, sir."

"British?"

"Can't see their colors, but stands to reason they be British."

Muley assumed a formal, professional air with his captain. He handed the telescope to Robert, who then examined the minute dots upon the new horizon.

By midday the wind had died to a gentle whisper, and the sails had been wet down to hold the waning breeze. But the other vessels were now becoming larger.

"The sweeps," Mr. Mulineer."

But fate was against Robert and his crew. Within two hours, the fleetest of the British

frigates had fired a volley to leeward for the *Carolana* to heave to.

He could have fought off one vessel, and if he had only himself to think about, he would still have resisted, even though it was madness to consider taking on all three, with their carronades in position. The *Carolana* would have been blasted out of the water.

As darkness enclosed the sea, Robert and Muley were in irons, and the *Carolana*, with its cargo, was a British prize, manned by a British crew heading for England.

So Sir George Cockburn, the man Robert had eluded time and again, had finally trapped him, adding the *Carolana* to the five hundred ships already confiscated.

Robert shuddered, remembering those dark days and his anger as he remained in the brig of his own ship on half-rations. And then he laughed.

He would give a tankard of rum to have seen Sir George's face when he discovered Robert had escaped that first night his ship lay anchored in the Liverpool harbor. He hoped the man who had helped him had not been found out—the American seaman who had been impressed by the British.

He was only sorry that Muley had been forced to stay behind.

"I can't swim, Robert, curse the luck! But don't let me stop ya," he had whispered. "Get out

while ya got the chance."

Robert became aware once more of the now almost deserted café. His hands tightened on the glass he held, while his lips curled in bitterness.

He had lost his ship, his first mate, his cargo and his profits—and in their place, he had gained an unwanted wife, waiting for him to return to Carolina.